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Poullart des Places at the age of 16.

## RE-READING POUILLART DES PLACES

Few of the writings of Claude-Francois Poullart des Places have come down to us. The earliest date from 1701, the year of his conversion, the latest from a few years before his premature death in 1709. Apart from his rule for the Seminary of the Holy Ghost none were intended for publication; rather were they his personal notes, often in the form of dialogue with his soul or with God.

With the possible exception of a few passages in his Seminary Rule, all were written before his ordination, between the age of 21 and 25, in the period of his decision to forego his future career and to devote himself to the poor. In this they relate to our own vocation and are part of our spiritan patrimony.

Going over these writings meditatively (a thing we seem seldom to do today) and abstracting from their dated style, there comes across a sense of great modernity as well as an echo of the doctrine of the Venerable Father. And this I should like to bring out in this article despite the difficulty of fitting Poullart's *spirit* into familiar categories and clear and distinct ideas.

With some embarrassment I have to admit to my neglect of the writings of Poullart des Places, despite their availability to us. (Dare I say I am not alone in this?). Besides the substantial volume of Fr. le Floch<sup>1</sup> and the more recent biography by Fr. Michel<sup>2</sup>, we have in both French and English a

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<sup>1</sup> H. Le Floch, *Claude-Francois Poullart des Places, fondateur du Seminaire et de la Congregation du Saint Esprit*, Paris 1906; second edition Paris, 1915.

<sup>2</sup> J. Michel, *Claude-Francois Poullart des Places, fondateur de la Congregation du Saint-Esprit*, Paris, 1962. We quote this under the name *Michel*, following its pagination.

complete edition of his writings by Frs Koren and Carignan<sup>3</sup>, books which should be in all our libraries and read by all of us.

In what I am attempting I am stimulated by the thought that in two years we shall be celebrating the tercentenary of Claude's birth on February 26, 1679 in the Breton town of Rennes. For his parents, Francois-Claude Poullart and Jeanne le Meneust, married since May 27, 1677,<sup>4</sup> and fearing they would have no children, the birth was the happy fulfilment of their expectations.

It is in the spirit of preparation for the tercentenary that I invoke the young Founder. Koren points out that we are the first congregation since the 16th century to have had a simple tonsured cleric (Claude) and an acolyte (Liebermann) as founders.<sup>5</sup> Certainly there is a youthfulness about his writings which could help us keep among ourselves a certain breath of youth.

## 1. Reflections on the truths of our religion

The two earliest examples we have of the writings of Poullart des Places go back to the retreat he made shortly after obtaining his brilliant licentiate in law at the age of twenty-one. Both le Floch and Koren assume he made this retreat at the Jesuit novitiate at the Rue du Pot-de-Fer under the direction of Fr Sanadon;<sup>6</sup> Michel considers it more likely to have been made at Rennes.<sup>7</sup> More important than this detail is that this retreat left an indelible mark on the young

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<sup>3</sup> H. J. Koren and M. Carignan, *The Spiritual Writings of Claude-Francois Poullart des Places*, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1969. Quoted as *Koren: Writings*.

<sup>4</sup> An apparent typographical error in Father J. Th. Rath's book: *Geschichte der Kongregation vom Heiligen Geist*, I. Teil, Knechtsteden, 1972, p. 78, gives the date of this event as 17th May.

<sup>5</sup> H. J. Koren, *Knaves or Knights?* Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1962, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Le Floch, loc. cit. p. 156; Koren, *Writings*, p. 42-43.

<sup>7</sup> Michel, p. 344.

lawyer and at this point he decided to consecrate his life to God. In the silence and recollection of those days he put his most intimate thoughts on paper.<sup>8</sup>

The first notes are called *Reflections on the Truths of Our Religion*. They are notes on the sermons he heard and follow the lines of the *Exercises* of St Ignatius. However many passages are quite his own and the personality of the writer comes through. For example this prayer which still has the power to speak to us across the years. Having thought long of consecrating himself to God, he at last decides to give in to the demands of love:

*"To You alone, O my God, it belongs to handle the heart of man. In acknowledging Your power how efficaciously I also thereby acknowledge Your love! You love me, my divine Saviour, and You give me evident proofs of that Love. I know that Your tenderness is infinite, for it is not exhausted by my innumerable past ingratiitudes. For a long time You have desired to speak to my heart, but so long I have refused to listen. You try to persuade me and convince me that You want to use me in the most holy and religious occupations, but I try not to believe You.*

*"If Your voice sometimes makes an impression on my mind, the world a moment later erases the mark of Your grace. So many years You have worked to re-establish what my passions continually destroy. I see very well that You have commanded victory to declare itself on God's side. The assaults You will make upon me during this retreat will give glory to You, although it will be much less difficult than during former assaults. I did not come here to defend myself; I am here only to allow myself to be vanquished.*

*"Speak Lord when You please . . . I am ready to heed the sacred commands of Your divine Providence. Descend into this heart where for so long a time You have desired to enter. That heart will now listen to You alone and will henceforth conceive no other affections than those that will make me love You as I ought".<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> This is the opinion of Michel, p. 340; Koren (*Writings*) considers it a copy made by M. Thomas.

<sup>9</sup> Koren, *Writings*, p. 49-51.

In his 'conversion', Claude, though far from being a great sinner, is aware that his conduct has at times been less than perfect and contained an admixture of ambition and worldly vanity.<sup>10</sup>

*"I must, as it were, change my nature, divest myself of the old Adam to be clothed with Jesus Christ . . . My God, You want me to be a man, but You want me to be a man after Your own heart. I understand what You are asking of me in one word and I want to grant it to You, for I know You will help me. Give me strength and anoint me with Your wisdom and virtue."*<sup>11</sup>

We note the words that were to become central to his spirituality: 'You want me to be a man, but You want me to be a man after Your own heart'. Because he is a man, Claude is aware of his frailty and his need of God's help.

*"If it is necessary that a weak reed like myself be exposed to the fury of the winds and the strongest tempests, gird me with Your mercy and cover my infirmity with the robe of justice . . ."*<sup>12</sup> *But after the example of David and with Solomon and Peter in mind what can I promise, what guarantee can I give, for even the most exalted cedars have fallen? I have not enough presumption to trust to my courage. I am a man, hence I am weak and could forget You at the very moment when I imagine I am most watchful over myself . . ."*<sup>13</sup> *I declare to You that I want to resist these pernicious allurements of sin. This I cannot do without Your help and I can never sufficiently pray for Your assistance. Never let me become blind. Enlighten me with the insight whereby You enlightened Augustine, Paul, Magdalen and so many other saintly persons."*<sup>14</sup>

His language describing sin and its effects belongs to the rhetoric of the age and his training as a lawyer. Other expressions about the anger of God and his vengeance towards sinners, about death and hell,<sup>15</sup> are also very much of his time

<sup>10</sup> *Ib.*, p. 51 par 3.

<sup>11</sup> *ib.*, p. 51, par 4.

<sup>12</sup> p. 53, par. 2.

<sup>13</sup> p. 59 par 1-2. The example of David and Solomon being overcome by temptation despite their holiness and wisdom appears in our Latin Rule, n. 50; there the quotation is attributed to St Jerome.

<sup>14</sup> p. 63 par 2.

<sup>15</sup> e.g. see Koren, *Writings*, pp. 24, par 1; 73, par 1-2; 67-68; 73-74.

but are comprehensible to those familiar with the language of the Bible and the oratorical style of the 17th and 18th centuries.

If one is struck by Claude's preoccupation with his personal salvation, this is understandable in that these notes were written under the instruction of the retreat-master who was preaching on the first week of the *Spiritual Exercises*: "the consideration and contemplation of sin".

However the following lines are decidedly apostolic in outlook:

*"I shall not be able to become accustomed to idols. I will go and destroy them even in their most powerful strongholds. Armed with powerful motives and supported by grace, I will seek to cut off from the dragon those heads that are constantly regenerated. I will make You known to all hearts that no longer know You . . . Aware of the disorder that exists in souls who have fallen into a bad habit, I will persuade, convince, force them to change their lives and You will be praised eternally by mouths that would have cursed You eternally."*<sup>16</sup>

One is tempted to smile at this confidence in the power of eloquence to persuade and convert hearts. But he will use other means too. He will teach them to pray, to do penance; he will encourage them against the assaults of the devil.<sup>17</sup> He himself stands in need of this same constancy and fears the weight of his bad habits:

*"A heart which has become used to satisfying its bad habits . . . is like a tree which the violence of the wind has bent to one side: when the tree falls it is always to the side to which it is bent. Only very rarely and almost never does it rise up straight again to fall to the other side. Such is the picture of the man who has become fond of sin and made it a habit. This picture, O Lord, increases my fear."*<sup>18</sup>

Not for fear of God's anger at his future sins but because of God's loving tenderness will he give himself to Him.

*"The chastisements which will follow my crime will not be the cause of my prudence and wisdom; it is the fear of of-*

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<sup>16</sup> Koren, *Writings*, p. 63, par 3.

<sup>17</sup> pp. 63-65.

<sup>18</sup> p. 67 par 2-3.

*fending You and displeasing a master who deserves to be so tenderly loved which will keep me, God, faithful to You as I ought to be . . .*<sup>19</sup> *The world will not reward me for the attachment which I have for it. I would find it difficult to locate even one friend who loves me disinterestedly. God alone loves me sincerely and wants what is good for me . . . May I find mortifications at every turn and may men rebuke and despise me! I accept all this, My God, provided that You love me always and that I may be always dear to You. I shall find it hard to suffer and extinguish that vanity with which I am filled, but what should a man not do for You, the God who has shed His precious blood for me?*"<sup>20</sup>

I end here the quotations from this first of the Founder's writings. Though it is not easy to pick out the main lines of his thought, the following points stand out:

1) Out of these rather impersonal thoughts about sin there emerges a strong conviction of the love of God inexorably pursuing the sinner, a love quite gratuitous and unfailing. Claude's decision is that his whole life should be a response to this love.

2) Accompanying the certitude of his decision there goes a deep awareness of human frailty and so the need for divine help to become the man attuned to the heart of God.

3) His decision to give himself completely to God includes the decision to work for the conversion of others, to oppose evil in all its forms, 'to fight the dragon whose heads are constantly being renewed'.

These ideas he clarifies in his subsequent writings.

## 2. Choice of a state of life

The second of the writings of Poullart des Places on which I should like to comment is a manuscript of nineteen pages following on his *Reflections*. Written during the same

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<sup>19</sup> p. 67, par 3.

<sup>20</sup> p. 83 par 1-2.



retreat, these pages are to be understood in the same context. At the conclusion of the previous document he is at the point of deciding about his future state of life.

*"I have to fear everything in my present state. I am not in the state, Lord, in which You can approve of me. I must choose that which You have destined for me. This is the first thing I must now consider."*<sup>21</sup>

We are still within the framework of the *Exercises*, the second week of which deals with the choice, or *election*, of a state of life. Claude follows the directives of St Ignatius while retaining a certain freedom in the order of his considerations. Rather than a systematic study of his methodology I should like to highlight his attitude before God in the search for His will.

He begins with this fine prayer:

*"O my God, guide to the heavenly Jerusalem of those who truly trust in You, I have recourse to Your divine Providence. I abandon myself entirely to You, I renounce my inclinations, my appetites, and my own will in order to follow Your will."*

*"Deign to reveal to me what You want me to do, so that, leading here below the kind of life for which You have destined me, I may realise that I am truly serving You during my pilgrimage in a state in which I am pleasing to You and in which You pour out abundantly upon me the graces I need to render always to Your divine majesty the glory that is its due."*<sup>22</sup>

This prayer contains fundamental attitudes of mind which recur throughout the document:

1) A certitude that God leads to salvation those who sincerely trust in Him and which leads to the abandon of self to the providence of God. More than once this certainty appears: "I hope that You will speak to my heart and through Your mercy you will disengage me from the embarrassing anxieties in which my indecision has plunged me"...<sup>23</sup> "You will grant me the grace I so badly need"...<sup>24</sup> "Lord I invite

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<sup>21</sup> Koren, *Writings* p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> *Ib* p. 89; cf. Le Floch, p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> *Ib*. p. 89-91.

<sup>24</sup> p. 91 par 5.

You to guide my steps since I am resolved to walk in the way you wish to point out to me". . . <sup>25</sup> "my God do not allow me to make a mistake, I place all my trust in You." <sup>26</sup>

2) In his search for God's will Claude will put aside his own inclination, desires and preferences. "I detach myself O my God, from all the wordly views which I held until now, in all the states of life I have thought of". . . <sup>27</sup> "I renounce all the advantages which might flatter me and which You do not approve. Behold I have acquired a very great indifference in regard to all the states of life. *Quid me vis facere, Domine? Paratum cor meum.* Lord what do You want me to do? My heart is ready." <sup>28</sup> . . . This indifference to all except the will of God is central to the second week of the *Exercises*, <sup>29</sup> as it is to the doctrine of Fr Libermann, <sup>30</sup> who also quotes Ps 56,8 (or 107,2). "Be ever ready to sacrifice to God all in your soul which might displease him and to follow in all things his divine and adorable good pleasure. You must be able to say to Him at every instant: *paratum cor meum, Domine, paratum cor meum.*" <sup>31</sup>

3) The introductory prayer ends with these words: 'Deign to make known to me what You would have me do so that . . . You may pour out upon me the grace I need always

<sup>25</sup> p. 93 par 1.

<sup>26</sup> p. 113, par 2.

<sup>27</sup> p. 91, par 5 on the following cf. the remarks of Pierre Thomas in his biography of Poullart des Places; quoted in Koren, *Writings* p. 252 s.

<sup>28</sup> p. 93, par 1.

<sup>29</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises* 2nd week, "the first way of making a true and holy choice": point 2: "My objective must be the end for which I was made, to praise God our Saviour and to save my soul. For the rest I must be indifferent, with no improper attachment so that I neither lean towards nor be attached to taking more than I leave nor leaving more than I take. I have to resemble the springs of a balance so as that I may follow at all times that which leads to the greater praise and glory of God and the salvation of my soul." Cf. Le Floch, *Claude-François Poullart des Places*, p. 168.

<sup>30</sup> For example see *Lettres Spirituelles*, I, pp. 53, 294, 471, 493; II, 106, 324, 465.

<sup>31</sup> Letter to M. Jolivel, 28th October 1838. *Notes et Documents*, vol. I, Paris 1929, p. 419.

to render the glory due to Your divine majesty'... Here again we detect the atmosphere of the *Exercises* which places the *election* in the context of the end for which God created man. "Consider again for what man has been born: to praise the Lord our God and to save his soul."<sup>32</sup> Poullart puts this in several ways: "God created me only that I might love and serve Him and finally enjoy the blessedness which is promised to the just. This is my only business. This is the end to which I must direct all my actions."<sup>33</sup> "I do not blame your inclination, provided I discover in it what is required, namely the glory of God and the desire to secure your salvation."<sup>34</sup> "I ask you therefore whether God alone and my salvation are the motives which prompt me to remain in the world."<sup>35</sup>

Uniting then his own salvation and the glory, love and service of God, Claude identifies with the famous sentence which opens the *Exercises*: "man has been created to praise, to respect and serve God, our Lord, and thus to save his soul."<sup>36</sup>

Although this prayer from his *Choice of a State of Life* can scarcely be called original, it does ring with a personal and touching sincerity in its search for the will of God and its rejection of all opposed to it.

### *A true Self-Portrait*

These writings give us a psychological self-portrait of Poullart des Places. "Here then is a complete portrait of myself, and as I look at it, I see it is a faithful copy of myself as I really am."<sup>37</sup>

It is tempting to linger over the portrait and attempt to analyse it; enough to note that this has been done by Fr Michel.<sup>38</sup> It would be particularly interesting to compare it

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Spiritual Exercises*, trans F. Courel nn. 177, 179, 181, 185.

<sup>33</sup> Koren, *Writings*, p. 91 par 3.

<sup>34</sup> p. 99, par 7.

<sup>35</sup> p. 105, par 4.

<sup>36</sup> See above, note 29.

<sup>37</sup> Koren, *Writings*, pp. 93-95.

<sup>38</sup> Michel, p. 59-71.

with the beautiful portrait of Claude painted a few years later by Jean Jouvenet and now in the Munich Gallery.<sup>39</sup> For lack of competence this is a task I must pass up. Instead of a psychological analysis I shall pick out the points of character which Claude himself considered help or obstacle in his search for the will of God.

The fault he mentions most is ambition, love of glory, of success, vanity. "A passionate desire for glory and for everything that sets a man above others by reason of his achievements,"<sup>40</sup> "a slave of grandeur, unable to meet with patience a marked affront,"<sup>41</sup> "full of jealousy and cast down by the success of others,"<sup>42</sup> he is conscious throughout the retreat that these faults can blind him to God's will. In part it is "anger at not being sufficiently appreciated by the world" or not being able to satisfy his ambition to take on the monastic cloister<sup>43</sup>. . . is it not ambition that drives him to the priesthood? . . . certainly it would be vanity which would draw him to a life at court,<sup>44</sup> or to a legal career.<sup>45</sup>

This self-analysis leads to decision. Clearly and enthusiastically he renounces self-glory and honour as a goal in life. Meditating on the "necessity of ever following the example of the ever-humble Jesus Christ,"<sup>46</sup> he prays, "defend me O my Lord, against those tempters. The most formidable is ambition, my predominant passion. Humble me, crush my pride, confound my vain glory."<sup>47</sup> This same spirit Claude will later inculcate into the Community of the Holy Ghost.

<sup>39</sup> Identified by Fr Michel. Poullart at the age of 16 is painted holding the works of Cicero, his prize for rhetoric. At the time Jean Jouvenet was working on the decoration of the Parliament of Brittany; later he altered the portrait, putting Poullart into clerical dress with stock. But the face remains that of the sixteen year old student. See photograph at the beginning of this issue.

<sup>40</sup> Koren, *Writings*, p. 93, par 4.

<sup>41</sup> p. 93, par 1.

<sup>42</sup> p. 93, par 4.

<sup>43</sup> p. 97-99.

<sup>44</sup> p. 101, par 3-4.

<sup>45</sup> p. 107, par 3.

<sup>46</sup> p. 101, par 6.

<sup>47</sup> p. 83, par 2.

<sup>48</sup> p. 49, par 3.

After ambition, the character trait he fixes on is "my excessively compliant and accomodating nature, the one thing I am constant about, agreeing with everybody."<sup>48</sup> Such a desire to please everybody might appear a virtue but Claude is aware of its inherent danger particularly that of lacking the firmness a priest should have.<sup>49</sup> Even as a lawyer, "you would be zealous also in that charge, you would worthily acquit yourself of it, if in all this your desire to please everybody did not expose you to the danger of disrupting all your good plans and resolutions. You would like to do your duty because you are religious, and yet you would like to listen to those who make all sorts of requests of you, because you like to satisfy everybody."<sup>50</sup> Apart from the professional dangers, his "distaste for raising a family,"<sup>51</sup> and "repugnance for the married life,"<sup>52</sup> would lead him to "remain a bachelor all my life" and this "might be dangerous for my salvation knowing my desire to please others."<sup>53</sup>

The thought of the priesthood involves the decision "to set aside your softness, to seek strength in the Lord . . . no longer serve your passion for pleasing others, except in order to do good and this would be a wonderful thing in one who has a meek and kind heart and earnestly embraces a life of virtue,"<sup>54</sup> though impossible unless "he enter soon a seminary where piety reigns."<sup>55</sup> Not only does he enter in fact such a seminary but God soon leads him to found such a seminary himself.

Besides fastening on his "easygoing" spirit, Claude reproaches himself with veering from one extreme to another, "at times as devout as an anchorite . . . at other times I am soft, cowardly, lukewarm in the fulfilment of my Christian duties."<sup>56</sup> "Your inconsistency makes you conceive of ever new desires and your new desires give birth to a thousand

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<sup>48</sup> p. 49, par 3.

<sup>49</sup> p. 103, par 1.

<sup>50</sup> p. 109, par 2.

<sup>51</sup> p. 103, par 6.

<sup>52</sup> p. 109, par 5.

<sup>53</sup> p. 109, par 5.

<sup>54</sup> p. 103, par 3.

<sup>55</sup> p. 103, par 3.

<sup>56</sup> p. 95, par 2.

chimeras."<sup>57</sup> Such inconstancy in doing good would be a grave obstacle to the priesthood.<sup>58</sup> He is "fond of rest and ease,"<sup>59</sup> given to "a soft life,"<sup>60</sup> the kind of life he would have at court.<sup>61</sup> He would go so far as to suspect that his attraction to the monastic life is inspired by laziness and his love of solitude.<sup>62</sup>

Many other imperfections of character are exposed in the hope that God will help him overcome them, cost what it will. Of the cost he is aware. "Indifferent as I am towards wealth,"<sup>63</sup> "sober in the matter of pleasure of the palate and taste and reserved regarding the pleasures of the flesh,"<sup>64</sup> "indifferent towards the other sex"<sup>65</sup> he still has a "secret and extreme tenderness towards his parents"<sup>66</sup> and owes it to them "never to do anything contrary to their will."<sup>67</sup> There is too his sister whom he loves dearly and cannot deprive himself of her presence for any length of time, "she is not yet settled in life and you love her so much that you want me to be interested in her welfare."<sup>68</sup> In the end he knows his parents will not oppose his vocation because "they know it is a holy one."<sup>69</sup>

Claude realises that he "is very much inclined to the ecclesiastical state"<sup>70</sup> and that since his youth he has had the inclination<sup>71</sup> "to convert souls to God . . . to be in a better po-

<sup>57</sup> p. 99, par 2.

<sup>58</sup> p. 103, par 1.

<sup>59</sup> p. 93, par 3.

<sup>60</sup> p. 97, par 6.

<sup>61</sup> p. 107, par 3.

<sup>62</sup> p. 97, par 6.

<sup>63</sup> p. 93, par 3.

<sup>64</sup> p. 95, par 1.

<sup>65</sup> p. 103, par 6.

<sup>66</sup> p. 109, par 3.

<sup>67</sup> p. 107, par 5.

<sup>68</sup> p. 98, par 5. Personally I am very hesitant about the link Ch. Baudouin makes between this fraternal affection and Claude's disinclination towards the married state.

<sup>69</sup> p. 99, par 4.

<sup>70</sup> p. 99, par 6.

<sup>71</sup> p. 103-105.

sition to do good and to be able to be more generous to the poor.”<sup>72</sup>

This inclination towards the poor should be noted. “I greatly love to give alms and am naturally compassionate towards those who suffer”. . . <sup>73</sup> “the predilection I have towards the poor.”<sup>74</sup> If he were to become a magistrate he would defend “following my natural bent, the poor, the widow and the orphans when right is on their side,”<sup>75</sup> and use his position to indulge his “inclination to give alms to the poor.”<sup>76</sup>

The very traits that were to guide his future career, a love of the poor, a desire to serve the Church, these he now discovers deep within his personality. When everything was clear and there seemed no further need for hesitation, his final decision is to leave all to the guidance of his director and so he ends with this final prayer:

*“O My God it is to You that I must appeal, hoping that You will determine me according to your will. I am here to consult your divine wisdom. Destroy in me the wordly attachments that cling to me everywhere. Once I have chosen a state let me no longer have any other thought than to please You. And since in my present state I am unable to come to a decision, though I know You want of me something more than incertitude, I will, O my God, expose myself without disguise to Your representative. Aided by Your grace, grant that I may find an Ananias who will show me the true way, as was done for Paul. I will follow his counsels as I follow Your commandments. My God, do not allow me to make a mistake. I place all my trust in You.”*<sup>77</sup>

In reality, as Michel points out, “Claude knew well what his Ananias would say to him, still he had to hear it. He did not wish to set himself upon the road to the priesthood; he would throw himself on Providence and take as the voice of the Lord the word spoken by His minister.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> p. 99-101.

<sup>73</sup> p. 95, par 2.

<sup>74</sup> p. 105, par 1.

<sup>75</sup> p. 109, par 2.

<sup>76</sup> p. 111, par 2.

<sup>77</sup> p. 113.

<sup>78</sup> Michel, p. 79.

The thoughts that strike me after reading this second of the writings of Poullart des Places are the following:

1) that of being in the presence of a young Christian whose overriding preoccupation was to serve God's will and whose search for this will of God is done in prayer and rigorous self-examination and with it a refusal to be sidetracked by anything other than the will of God;

2) his very special desire to serve the poor;

3) his awareness of the danger of ambition, to overcome which he must follow the example of 'the ever-humble Jesus', all characteristics which are very much part of our authentic Spiritan heritage.

Joseph LECUYER  
(*to be continued*)